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Care about your career? Don't specialize.

grace leake

Despite increased pressure to specialize in one academic discipline while in college, a well-rounded education can be the best investment for attaining future success.

Ted Hadzi-Antich Jr., a government professor at Austin Community College, spoke to this pressure of specialization. “I think the push to specialize really comes from the increasingly high cost of higher education,” Hadzi-Antich said. “Students and their parents want to be sure that their investment is going to pay off, and most feel that it’s more likely to if one is trained in one specific field and ready for employment in that field on graduation day.” With the job market in constant flux and the price of education skyrocketing, there is an enormous pressure on students to choose a lucrative major and focus on just one field and its related career promises.

This type of intense specialization is tempting. The more expertise a student gains in one field, the better they are prepared for potential employment, right? Isn’t that the safest approach to take when facing such an uncertain job market? Perhaps not. Students and their parents often forget the value a broad-based education can hold for future careers. Learning to reach across different disciplines can make students more inventive and give them a unique perspective on a specific problem. Often it is those who dabble in multiple fields, rather than the specialized “experts,” who bring about the most impressive changes in a discipline. Take, for example, Douglas Adams, the writer who paired his love of science and comedy to create his wacky, beloved

behavioral economics. If these visionaries had limited themselves to one pursuit, one focus, they never could have reached the same insights and created the same change that they did.

A discipline-bridging education can also be practical for navigating the changing job market. With the ongoing technological innovation our society is experiencing, there is no knowing which skills and trainings will be in demand at any one time. The general skills that one gains from a broad education are much more durable than specific, career-focused skills. Hadzi-Antich spoke to the usefulness which these skills can provide: “interdisciplinary study grounded in the examination of fundamental questions...helps students build the practice and skills necessary to speak clearly, read carefully, reason effectively, and think creatively,” he said. “All of which create a solid foundation upon which they can build any academic major and profession they choose to pursue, as well as an active life of engaged civic participation.” These skills of creativity, communication, and critical thinking are widely applicable and can withstand the fluctuating demands of the job market.

In contrast, more specific skills can trap students in the long run. “The problem...is that for many students higher education has become a trade school where students take the vast majority of their courses in preparation for one specific career. An education that only qualifies graduates to find work in one field or industry enslaves many of them to perform a single function for their entire lives,” Hadzi-Antich commented. Our current world calls for versatile, adaptable workers. A career-specific approach to education gives students no such preparation.

Increasingly, students are pressured into pursuing a limited, career-focused education. But be wary of this type of education’s career promises. The inventiveness and innovation that a broad education can lend, combined with its set of more durable, widely applicable skills, can be a much better investment for the future. This does not even touch upon the benefits which a broad education can confer upon an individual’s mind and soul; even from a purely career-focused standpoint, a discipline-bridging education has great merit.

So how do students seek out this sort of education? The simplest answer is that they should pick a major which embodies the qualities of creativity, communication, and critical thinking which Hadzi-Antich referenced. However, there are other ways to pursue a discipline-bridging education. A student working towards a specialized degree could add a minor or a certificate to increase their versatility and experience. More easily still, students can pursue these qualities of education by working to expose themselves to new ways of thinking. They can attend lectures and join organizations which challenge and stretch their mindsets, forcing them to think and communicate beyond their preconceived ideas. Will this small-scale exploration be

as effective as pursuing an interdisciplinary major itself? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But it is certainly a step in the right direction.

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